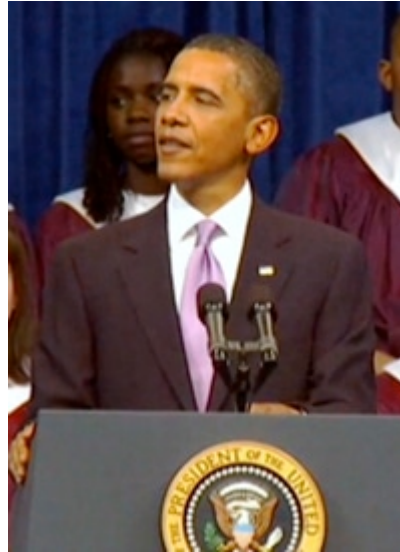




Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on March 8, 2011

## Race to the Top Commencement Challenge in Dire Straits

President Obama may be humbled by the dramatically decreased number of schools requesting his presence at commencement ceremonies. Last year, more than 1,000 schools competed to secure a commencement address from President Obama, but according to a leaked internal White House memo, there is a serious shortage of applicants for the Race to the Top Commencement Challenge this year.



The White House [website](#) explains of the challenge:

The Commencement Challenge invites public high schools across the country to demonstrate how their school best prepares them for college and a career, helping America win the future by out-educating our competitors and achieving President Obama's goal of having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020.

Naturally, the winner of the challenge is treated to a commencement address delivered by the President: "The president will travel to the school that is judged to best prepare students for college and careers."

The website boasts about last year's application process, for which 1,000 applications were received:

On June 7, 2010, President Obama delivered the commencement address at Kalamazoo Central High School in Kalamazoo, Michigan [picture, above], the winner of the 2010 Race to the Top Commencement Challenge. During the course of the Commencement Challenge, we received more than 1,000 applications that which were narrowed down by the White House Domestic Policy Council and Department of Education to six finalists...President Obama then selected a winner from the three high schools with the highest average ratings.

In just one year, however, the number of applicants has dwindled dramatically. [CBS News](#) reports:

The competition was extended from the February 25 deadline until Friday, March 11 after a few schools met the original application deadline. CBS News has learned a White House Communications Office internal memo dated February 22 noted "a major issue with the Commencement Challenge."

The memo read, "As of yesterday we had received 14 applications and the dealing is Friday. Please keep the application number close hold."



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A February 28 follow-up memo then reported the receipt of 68 applications, but noted that the number was still significantly lower than last year's figures. The memo remarked that "something isn't working," and encouraged staffers to ask "friendly congressional, gubernatorial and mayoral offices" to encourage schools to apply for the challenge.

The memo also asked staffers to keep the meager number of applications a secret:

We should also make sure the Cabinet is pushing the competition out to their lists. We do not want the actual application number out there (we didn't release the number of applications we received last year until after the submission period) — so folks should not use it in their pitches.

Though White House officials are reluctant to release the actual number of applications received, Education Secretary Arne Duncan has indicated that the administration is flabbergasted by the apparent lack of interest.

"It's a huge opportunity for high schools to tell their story," Duncan told CBS Radio. "Folks are working hard." On the radio program, Duncan encouraged schools to "put their best foot forward and join the competition."

[ABC news](#) has offered a number of possible causes for the low turnout, ranging from poor publicity and lack of enthusiasm for President Obama, to underachieving students and weak school administrators.

Meanwhile, a press aide from the Department of Education seemed hopeful when he announced that the deadline for the challenge has been extended in order "to provide an ample amount of time to reach out to schools from across the country...Like last year, we anticipate the overwhelming majority will be submitted near the close of the Challenge."

The White House has also resorted to releasing a video that features a member of last year's winning class, in order to inspire schools to participate in the challenge.

Regardless of the poor showing of applicants, White House spokesman Gannet Tseggai managed to sidestep the issue, saying:

We're pleased by the quality of applications that are coming in and the President looks forward to encouraging young people to graduate from high school and pursue college and careers.



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